

Introduction

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PHOENIX KINGDOMS: *The Last Splendor of China's Bronze Age* aims to showcase the remarkable material culture of the southern frontier of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1050–256 BCE), the final chapter of China's Bronze Age. This territory along the middle Yangzi River was associated with beliefs and rituals that were considered uncultivated by the ruling Zhou elites of the Central Plains. Called “southern barbarians” (*nanman*) in historical sources, these indigenous peoples practiced shamanism, worshipped their own deities, and conducted lavish ceremonies that differed markedly from orthodox Zhou traditions. The cultures and customs of this region are best represented by archaeological finds from Zeng (ca. 1040–after 400 BCE) and Chu (ca. 1030–223 BCE), two vassal states that thrived in the area between the Yangzi and Han Rivers known today as the Jiang-Han Plain. While at their peak these states vied for dominance of the southlands, both collapsed in turn due to military failures, and their glory was gradually forgotten over time. Two thousand years passed before modern archaeology revealed the wealth of their material culture and demonstrated the sophisticated cultural landscape outside the heartland of the Zhou dynasty, traditionally considered the core of Chinese civilization.

Phoenix Kingdoms is a groundbreaking project that focuses on material remains of both the Zeng and Chu states to explore the significant contribution of the peoples of the middle Yangzi River region in the formation of early Chinese art. A lack of historical records and the biases of earlier historians prevented Chu from receiving the attention it deserved. The existence of the Zeng state—a name not formally documented in previous histories—was only recently confirmed by field archaeology. Rich finds from modern Hubei province in south-central China have enabled scholars to explore the extravagant lifestyles and religious beliefs of the Zeng and Chu aristocracy and piece together a relatively full picture of political power

on the Jiang-Han Plain during the 800 years of the Zhou dynasty. These discoveries demonstrate the evolution of a distinctive southern cultural tradition in the middle Yangzi region, where the worship of fire and totems of the magical phoenix were popular. Highly significant in the art of the region, phoenix imagery not only fulfilled ritual and funerary functions in local life but also inspired vigorous interest in the spirit world and transcendence.

Representing the major states that once thrived on the southern frontier, Zeng and Chu are thus called “phoenix kingdoms” in this catalogue. Originating on the Central Plains, the ruling houses of Zeng and Chu established their fiefs on this remote land, synthesizing Zhou culture with local traditions and customs, though in different ways and to different extents. Along with other states there, they developed a prosperous way of life that gradually evolved into what is broadly termed “Chu culture.” An exploration of the rise and fall of these two states illuminates how the interactions among the northern and southern traditions contributed to the diversity of Chinese art and established a fertile ground for further artistic and cultural development in the following two millennia.

PHOENIX KINGDOMS IN HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

During the early years of the Zhou dynasty, the middle course of the Yangzi River was a little-explored frontier that for centuries remained beyond the direct dominion of the central throne. To better control the populations and resources there, the founding Zhou kings dispatched princes and officials to establish their own fiefs in this remote southern territory. Claiming nominal loyalty to the Zhou court, these vassal states of varying sizes were stationed along major trade routes and functioned as agents exploiting important natural resources, such as copper and gold, and supervising the trade and taxation of major

goods. They also helped Zhou kings govern uncultivated local tribes and oversee unruly kingdoms affiliated with the previous Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1050 BCE).

Founded by a prominent Zhou prince called Nangong (Duke of the South), the Zeng state attained the trust and direct support of the Zhou court due to its royal bloodline. Its marquises even obtained from the Zhou kings the ceremonial ax, a royal symbol that represented the recipient's authority as an exclusive agent of Zhou in its quest to control the south. Zeng soon became the most prestigious and powerful among the vassal states on the Jiang-Han Plain. It not only dominated the Han River area along the middle Yangzi but also supervised other vassal states in the area of the Huai River along the lower Yangzi. Zeng probably functioned as the model for many of these states, including Chu, from which they copied established Zhou ritual practices and court etiquette. This cultural and political dominance possibly lasted a couple of centuries, until Zeng was surpassed by the ambitious and fast-growing Chu state. During the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, Zeng marquises were obliged to obey powerful Chu kings, and some decades after 400 BCE the kingdom was finally absorbed into Chu's cultural system.

Like their Zhou counterparts, Zeng nobles valued music in court rituals and entertainment, regarding bronze bells as important emblems of their ceremonial privileges and social status. From their use and care of ritual bells, it's clear that Zeng nobles were entrusted with promoting orthodox Zhou traditions in the south. Notably, one of the earliest ritual bell sets found in China was from the tomb of a Zeng marquis (cat. 67), which attests to the important role Zeng played in enriching the high culture of the Zhou and in spreading it throughout the southland. The largest and most heavily inscribed bell of the period (cat. 70) was also found in a royal Zeng tomb, and its inscription records the last glorious moment in Zeng history: its role as a dutiful vassal of the old system in the salvation of Chu from its demise at the hands of invading Wu troops in 506 BCE.

Unlike Zeng, Chu was originally regarded by the Zhou as a barbaric state, and in its earliest years it left no clear mark in the archaeological record due to its lack of a distinct material culture. Routinely attacked by hostile forces, Chu beat long odds and grew from a small fief into a large kingdom. In its aggressive quest for power and resources, Chu developed a strong military culture and quickly expanded its territory. By adeptly incorporating indigenous elements into Zhou traditions, Chu created a splendid material culture that overshadowed those of other vassal states in the south. The sophisticated designs and flamboyant style of its bronze and lacquer works best demonstrate the tastes and fashions of Chu elites driven by their demand for glory and novelty.

Yet little was known of the material cultural accomplishments of Zeng and Chu until the rise of modern archaeology in the past century. Records concerning these states were largely erased by the Qin empire (221–206 BCE), the former Qin state that managed to conquer Chu and other states to unify China. Amazingly, large quantities of Zeng and Chu burial objects in various mediums have survived to demonstrate the important achievements of these two states in art, music, literature, religion, and philosophy—advances that significantly contributed to the richness and complexity of early Chinese civilization. The recently uncovered wealth of material also reflects a distinctive cultural identity among local peoples who tapped an unrestrained creativity and imagination in their art making.

ABOUT THE CATALOGUE AND ITS GOALS

With over 150 objects on loan from five Chinese museums in Hubei province, *Phoenix Kingdoms* explores the art and legacy left by the ancient Zeng and Chu states in Bronze Age China. It holistically examines for the first time the

distinctive cultural and religious traditions of the Yangzi River, now understood to equal the Yellow River as a cradle of Chinese civilization. A selection of these fascinating works illuminates the characteristic features of art from this region—the worship of phoenix totems, for example, and the use of sacred bird-animal motifs—in relation to the indigenous beliefs and ritual practices of the south. It also provides an opportunity to compare and contrast the states of Zeng and Chu and suggests how the latter was able to surpass other polities in the process of shaping a southern artistic tradition. In other words, *Phoenix Kingdoms* celebrates the full formation of a distinctive material culture in southern China as represented by Chu art in its heyday.

If the companion exhibition demonstrates the unparalleled achievements of Zeng and Chu in art and design, the catalogue delves into how the art of the Yangzi region differs from the orthodoxies that dominated the Yellow River region to the north. This distinctive culture engendered a romantic image of Chu that survived in the collective memory of the Chinese as a powerful symbol of the south. Still, the first half of Chu history remains unclear, as not many early Chu burial sites have survived or can be easily identified. Fortunately, recent archaeological discoveries have revealed the untold story of Zeng, a state that attained regional dominance before Chu did. The inclusion of material from Zeng is thus crucial to giving readers a fuller understanding of the early history of the Jiang-Han Plain and to identifying traditions and changes within the sphere that later scholars dubbed “Chu culture.”

The first part of the catalogue focuses on how archaeology has uncovered the art and myth of the middle Yangzi and illuminates the sophisticated cultural landscape that existed at the dawn of China’s first empires. Jay Xu’s recounting of the rediscovery of Zeng through archaeology not only relates stories of forgotten nobles but also explores its political relations with Zhou and Chu as reflected by the development of its bronze artifacts. In the second essay I review the history of Chu and survey the discovery of important Chu tombs, summarizing major characteristics of Chu art and its lasting influence. John Major links archaeological finds with the cultural and religious phenomena of the Yangzi region recorded in historical and literary sources, demonstrating the close connections of Chu’s artistic practices to the indigenous beliefs and shamanistic practices of the south.

The second part of the book illuminates the diverse origins of Zeng and Chu art and explores their similarities and differences in the context of the south. Arguably, Zeng functioned as a dutiful agent on a mission to spread metropolitan Zhou culture while, at the same time, introducing southern elements to the Zhou court. Chu did not

simply imitate and mix northern and southern traditions; rather, it appropriated various strands to create an artistic legacy of its own. Colin Mackenzie compares the jade-making traditions in Zeng and Chu, suggesting their connection with local cultural and religious practices as well as to the prehistoric Shijiahe culture of the region. Focusing on the courtly use of ritual bells, Haicheng Wang highlights the investment Zeng nobles made in assembling full bell sets and developing sophisticated court music, revealing how the Zhou elites absorbed elements from the south and then returned that hybrid culture to the Jiang-Han Plain via agents such as Zeng and Chu. Guolong Lai and I-fen Huang address lacquerware and textiles, new luxury goods of great intricacy that overshadowed traditional bronzes toward the end of the Bronze Age. Exemplifying Chu’s stylistic preferences and religious influence, these works were often pursued by the aristocracies of other states as fashionable and luxurious items.

The last part of the catalogue presents six sections on the objects in the exhibition. Organized by medium and function, they illuminate the distinctive styles and advanced techniques of the art and craft of Zeng and Chu that are clearly equal in sophistication to those of their northern counterparts. Discussions of individual objects investigate the links among various features and patterns of Zeng and Chu art, revealing their significance in the larger context of early China. By exploring the implications of decorative, ritual, luxury, and funerary goods, detailed studies further show how a mix of imported Zhou and local traditions functioned as vital inspiration for artistic creation and technical innovation in this era and beyond.

In short, the thriving art making and consumption of the Jiang-Han Plain constitutes a major cultural achievement outside the heartland of the Zhou dynasty, resulting in the last splendors of China’s Bronze Age. On this fertile land that cultivated belief in fire and phoenix, ancient states such as Zeng and Chu made unique contributions to the formation of an artistic legacy of the south, reinforcing the crucial role of the Yangzi region in the development of Chinese civilization. Without the recent finds from Zeng and Chu, an important part of the history of early China would be lost. Without the stories of this domain, no narrative of Chinese art can be called complete. The renown of these southern “phoenix kingdoms” may have faded over time, but now, thanks to new scholarship inspired by modern archaeology, it has risen from the ashes of oblivion to newfound glory.